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Colonising Visions: A Physiognomy of Face and Place in Erich Retzlaff's Book 'Länder und Völker an der Donau: Rumänien, Bulgarien, Ungarn, Kroatien'

Christopher Webster van Tonder

Introduction

"The book [is] still the most important means of influencing the spiritual and intellectual stance of the German Volk in all its profundity."¹

In 1944, Wilhelm Andermann Verlag (Vienna) published a book entitled *Länder und Völker an der Donau: Rumänien, Bulgarien, Ungarn, Kroatien* (Countries and Peoples on the Danube: Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Croatia). This quarto sized book was lavishly illustrated with forty-seven of its eighty pages dedicated to thirty-eight colour plates (some of them presented as large double-page spreads). This full-colour illustrated book was the work of the photographer Erich Retzlaff (1899–1993) and the plates visually chronicled Retzlaff's journey through selected states along the course of the Danube River. On the face of it, these facts are not very remarkable in themselves. The format and style of the book, its size and presentation, all conform to the type of well-illustrated picture-dependent monograph that was – and still is – typical of this genre of travel photography publication. Yet, for a sumptuously illustrated book of this type to appear when it did is remarkable. At this period, the *Greater German Reich* was losing the war. Materials were in short supply and, after the Jassy-Kishinev operation by the Soviet army in August 1944,² Germany and its allies were on the defensive. The very lands depicted in this book were being overrun or under immediate threat of invasion.

This essay will consider the question of why this book was published when it was, and what it set out to achieve. In order to do this, the message embedded within the aesthetic construction of the book must be analysed and, in addition, the work and motivations of the photographer himself understood.

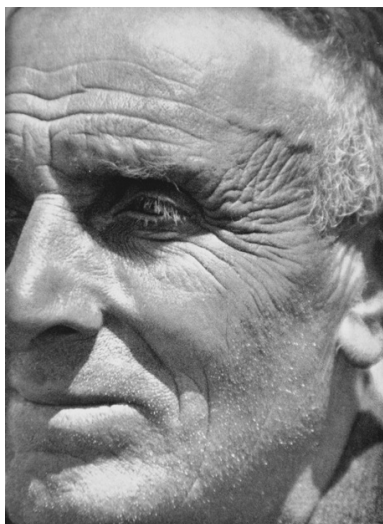
The photographer and the book

Erich Retzlaff was a photographer who enjoyed a certain celebrity as a creative practitioner of photography during the Third Reich.³ Since the start of his career in the late Weimar period, Retzlaff had carved out a reputation as a *völkisch*⁴ photographer. After the National Socialists came to power in 1933, Retzlaff's profile as a photographer of the people, architecture and landscape of Germany, continued to grow. Critically acclaimed for his striking portfolio of closely cropped, modern, almost cinematic, portraits of ethnic Germans (fig. 1), Retzlaff's standing as a 'fellow traveller' of the regime was soon established.⁵ By the late 1930s, and after just over a decade of photographic professionalism, Retzlaff was widely published and recognised as one of the foremost 'Heimat' photographers in Germany. With the introduction of *Agfacolor Neu* colour film in 1936, Retzlaff was one of the first photographers to experiment with the new process in depth. Along with several other high profile German photographers,⁶ Retzlaff went on to adopt colour photography for much of his later publication work, as well

Figure 1

Erich Retzlaff, *Heidebauern*, c.1929, published in: Erich Retzlaff, *Die von der Scholle*, Göttingen: Verlag der Deuerlichschen Buchhandlung n.d. (1931), 15.

All pictures courtesy of Jürgen Retzlaff who holds the copyright to his father's work.



1. Wilhelm Haegert (1907–1994) leader of the *Abteilung Schrifttum* [Department of Literature] in the Propaganda Ministry. Quoted in Jan-Pieter Barbian, *The Politics of Literature in Nazi Germany: Books in the Media Dictatorship*, London: Bloomsbury 2010, 287.

2. Richard Natkiel, *Atlas of 20th Century Warfare*, London: Bison Books 1982, 165.

3. See, for example, my discussion on Retzlaff's work in *PhotoResearcher* No.16, 2011, 8–21.

4. There is no real equivalent for the term *völkisch* in English; it transcends simple ethnicity to suggest a mix of Romantic sentiment and history coupled with a mystical racial nationalism.

5. Retzlaff was a pre-1933 member of the NSDAP (membership number 1014457) and was selected to photograph many of the party notables for a celebratory 1933 publication *Wegbereiter und Vorkämpfer für das neue Deutschland* (Pioneers and Champions of the New Germany).



SOMMERLICHE KIRCHGANGSTRACHT IN SIEBENBÜRGEN

70



WINTERLICHE KIRCHGANGSTRACHT IN SIEBENBÜRGEN

71

Figure 2
Erich Retzlaff, *Sommerliche Kirchengangstracht in Siebenbürgen* (left), *Winterliche Kirchengangstracht in Siebenbürgen* (right), c.1942, published in: *Deutsche Trachten*, Königstein: Verlag Langewiesche Nachf. 1958.

as writing guides on the technique for professionals and amateurs alike.⁷ It was colour photographic materials to which Retzlaff turned to provide the illustrations for *Länder und Völker* using a lightweight Contax 35mm camera with Zeiss lenses to provide portability coupled with quality.

There are no surviving records to suggest when Retzlaff actually made the photographs for *Länder und Völker* but, considering that he was experimenting with colour photography around 1937/38, it is possible that he began quite soon after this date. A clue can be found in Retzlaff's book *Deutsche Trachten*. The first edition of this book was published in 1936 and contained black and white plates of German regional costumes. In that first edition, Retzlaff was the author of the majority of the photographs taken in the *Reich* whilst the photographs of ethnic Germans outside of the *Reich*, or *Volksdeutsche*,⁸ were the work of other photographers. By the time of the 1958 edition however, several colour plates of these *Volksdeutsche* taken by Retzlaff appear. Two are of a Transylvanian Saxon couple posed on the left hand page in their summer and then, on the right, in their winter church going clothes (both photographs were clearly taken at the same time, in the summer) (fig. 2). The winter garments that they are modelling in the right hand image are beautifully crafted by hand and intricately stitched

6. Others included Hans Retzlaff [no relation] (1902–1965) and Otto Croy (1902–1977) both of whom, like Erich Retzlaff, were widely published in the 1930s and '40s.

7. For example, Retzlaff contributed both images and text for the book Eduard von Pagenhardt (ed.), *Agfacolor, das farbige Lichtbild. Grundlagen und*

Aufnahmetechnik für den Liebhaberphotographen, Munich: Verlag Knorr & Hirth 1938.

8. 'Volksdeutsche' was a National Socialist term used to describe those of German descent living outside of the German Reich such as the Transylvanian Saxons and the Danube Swabians.

with patterns in bright colours. The date of the garment's creation, 1939, is carefully embroidered on the man's collar in this second photograph.⁹ So the photograph was made no sooner than 1939. As will become clear later, these colour photographs reproduced in the 1958 edition of *Deutsche Trachten* were made at the same time as the photographs that were used to illustrate *Länder und Völker*. The most likely period for Retzlaff to have travelled on this project is after the start of the Second World War and following the successful (Axis) Balkans campaign of 1941.¹⁰ Therefore, in all probability, Retzlaff would have made the majority of the work sometime between the summer of 1942 and 1943; that is, after the cessation of hostilities and in a timely manner to ensure a 1944 publication deadline.

There is something else that must be considered central to viewing and *reading* Retzlaff's photography. Retzlaff was a practitioner of photographic physiognomy.¹¹ His first two publications under the umbrella title of *Deutsche Menschen* (1931) established his standing as a recorder of the physiognomic face of the German peasant and worker. Volume one was entitled *Die von der Scholle* (*From the Soil*) and focussed on farmers and agricultural workers where volume two, *Menschen am Werk* (*People at Work*), looked at people engaged in industry. This preoccupation with physiognomy was not singular to Retzlaff. In fact, physiognomy was an enormously popular pseudo-scientific fad in the German antebellum period. Where Retzlaff's physiognomy is divergent from that of some of his contemporaries in the Weimar period (such as August Sander for example) is that his work became aligned to a specifically German *völkisch* milieu that regarded the peasant as the acme of the modern German precisely because they had retained connectivity with the past through their customs, their dress and, in particular, their blood. A photographic physiognomic examination such as Retzlaff's served to demonstrate the racial worthiness of his subjects. In an age where eugenics was being advanced by intellectuals and politicians across the political spectrum and on a national and international stage, such studies were considered invaluable as objective tools for assessing the quality of the masses (and thus the potential of the state).

With regards to *Länder und Völker*, this physiognomic approach continued to be evident where Retzlaff's photographs of both the human visage and the landscape (which itself is offered as being able to *reveal* its suitability for the future German settler and simultaneously *reflect* the character of the people currently inhabiting the landscape) are presented as a catalogue of potential.¹²

9. This information about the practice of embroidering the date on traditional garments was confirmed to me in a correspondence with the *Buchhaltung des Verbandes der Siebenbürger Sachsen*. "Die Jahreszahl, die in der Jacke bestickt ist, das ist die Jahreszahl in der die Jacke hergestellt wurde. Bei den Trachten, sei es Jacken, Mäntel, Schürzen wurden meistens mit einer Jahreszahl versehen, damit man weiß, wann es gestickt wurde. Meistens haben Frauen und Männer zu ihrer Konfirmation dieses Trachtenstück erhalten oder zu ihrer Hochzeit. Dann ist es auch die Jahreszahl in der die Person ihre Konfirmation oder ihre Hochzeit hatte." [The numbers that have been embroidered on the jacket show the year in which it was made. Traditional costumes – jackets, coats and aprons – were usually given a date to show when they were embroidered. It was customary for women and men to be given these traditional articles of clothing for their confirmation and wedding. This is then also the year in which the person celebrated his confirmation or

wedding.]. Stephanie Kepp, Assistenz der Geschäftsleitung und Buchhaltung des Verbandes der Siebenbürger Sachsen in Deutschland, personal communication, November 2014.

10. By 1942, Yugoslavia had been partitioned and the Balkans (for the time being) were largely pacified.

11. For a deeper analysis of Retzlaff's physiognomy see my book: *Erich Retzlaff: Volksfotograf*. Aberystwyth: Aberystwyth University, The School of Art Press 2013.

12. As a *völkisch* photographer, Retzlaff was a photographer concerned with imaging particular esoteric concepts through his physiognomic approach such as an 'Aryan' racial heritage and blood and soil (German *Blut und Boden*) mystical paradigms as espoused by Richard Walther Darré (1895-1953), Heinrich Himmler (1900-1945) and Alfred Rosenberg (1893-1946), Germany's occult triumvirate [of whom, Retzlaff had certainly met Darré and Himmler].

Further clues on the intention of this book are provided by the writer of the foreword to the text, Dr. Franz Thierfelder (1896–1963). Thierfelder, a cultural historian and specialist of cultural policy, had been secretary general of the *Deutsche Akademie* (the precursor to the modern *Goethe-Institut*) with its focus on the promotion of the German language – linked to cultural diplomacy – abroad.¹³ In his published works, it is clear that Thierfelder was committed to the notion of a German sphere of influence in the Balkan region to ensure the autarky of a land-based German empire with control over pan-regions. Kris Manjapra discussed this concept in a recent (2014) study of the relationship between Germany and Indian intellectuals: “Thierfelder’s main writings focused on a view of the Balkans as the lost land of a land-based German empire, and the prospective role the German language could play in the region as the universal tongue to mediate national differences...At the height of resurfacing German imperialist reveries in the late 1920s, Thierfelder saw the enchanted vision of German-speakers sitting at the top of their own land and sea empire ranging throughout central and southeast Europe.”¹⁴

This viewpoint is certainly reinforced by Thierfelder’s own writing in *Länder und Völker*. In the introduction, he underlines his passionate belief in the appropriation of the Balkans into (a German-dominated) Western sphere of influence and the importance of informative texts such as *Länder und Völker* to achieve this: “The more people in our world who make a truthful picture of the peoples of the Southeast, the faster the misconceptions about the concept of the ‘Balkans’ will fade, but more difficult (to achieve) still, is the necessary inclusion of these European, not Oriental peoples, into the Western community.”¹⁵

Certainly a task made more difficult by the westward thrust of the Soviet armies. But rising above the reality of the military situation was never a problem for the National Socialist propaganda machine. Indeed, the certainty of a change in fortunes and Germany resurgent was a core tenet of such propaganda particularly as the situation became increasingly desperate. *Länder und Völker* is perhaps a symptom of the fact that this was a time of “decreasing propaganda effectiveness and increasing dependence on the substitution of myth for reality.”¹⁶

The question of who may have commissioned Retzlaff is an intriguing one because Retzlaff would have required funding for travel and materials or at the very least would have had the expectation of remuneration once the work was complete (through a publishing contract) and the journey is a very specific one.¹⁷ That Retzlaff might have been supported by the state on this Danube project is certainly likely especially in consideration of the nature of the subject matter with its attendant ideological and propaganda potential.¹⁸ Retzlaff had, for example, been

13. www.deutsche-biographie.de/xsfzT1328.html (11.08.14)

14. Kris Manjapra, *Age of Entanglement – German and Indian Intellectuals across Empire*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2014, 205.

15. Franz Thierfelder from his introduction to Erich Retzlaff’s *Länder und Völker an der Donau*, Wilhelm Andermann Verlag 1944, 7–8 [author’s translation].

16. David Welch, *The Third Reich Politics and Propaganda*, London: Routledge 2006, 150.

17. According to Professor Dr. Rolf Sachsse, one possibility is that Retzlaff benefited from his relationship with his lover Regina Dorsch (Verlag Otto Beyer) who made use of her influence in publishing to secure a valuable

contract for Retzlaff with the Metzner Verlag to produce colour physiognomic portraits of notable Germans, *Das Gesicht des Geistes* (also published in 1944). Rolf Sachsse, personal communication, August 2014.

18. Retzlaff certainly had dealings with Goebbels’ ‘Reich Ministry for the People’s Enlightenment and Propaganda’ and Hans Hinkel in particular in the late 1930s. Hans Hinkel was a special commissioner at the Ministry and it is feasible that Retzlaff was receiving commissions from the Ministry. Unfortunately, correspondence with the Bundesarchiv established that the existing file (R 56-I/257 - Reichskulturkammer. - Zentrale einschließlich Büro Hinkel, Korrespondenz mit Fotograf Erich Retzlaff) is currently misfiled/lost. Bundesarchiv, personal communication August 2014.

Figure 4

Erich Retzlaff, *In den Fogarascher Karpaten Rumänien*, c.1942, published in: *Länder und Völker an der Donau: Rumänien, Bulgarien, Ungarn, Kroatien*, Vienna: Andermann 1944.

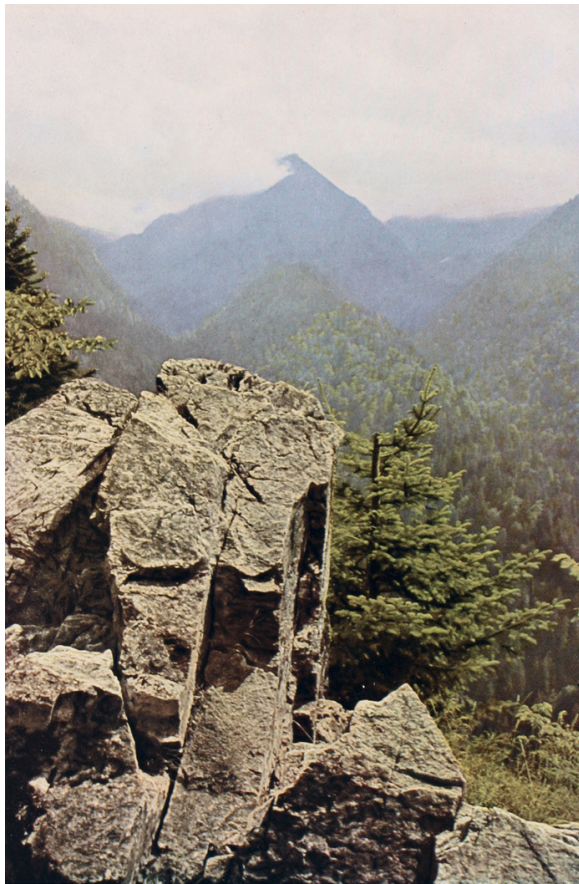


Figure 3

Erich Retzlaff, *Sonnenaufgang am Plattensee Ungarn*, c.1942, published in: *Länder und Völker an der Donau: Rumänien, Bulgarien, Ungarn, Kroatien*, Vienna 1944.



offered support from Himmler's *Ahnenerbe*-SS¹⁹ in 1942 when he had been exploring the possibility of a collaborative project with the Dutch *völkisch* photographer Willem F. van Heemskerck Düker.²⁰ Retzlaff's thesis, his fascination with and recording of the physiognomic Germanic face, accorded with the *völkisch*, racial milieu born out of a combined interpretation of social Darwinism and occult sources such as Helena Blavatsky's Theosophy with its 'Root Races'.²¹ It was an interpretation that drew sustenance from sci-

entific and eugenic thinking whilst simultaneously alluding to a heroic, romantic and mystical German history, and it was an interpretation of especial interest to Heinrich Himmler, the *Reichsführer*, himself.

The translated notes below are usefully illustrative of how such a photography project might have developed (in this instance supported by Himmler) in conjunction with a publisher, as in the case below, the Metzner Verlag:

From a report on the journey of W.F. van Heemskerck Düker [VHD] and (secretary-assistant) Machteld Nachenius on their journey to Berlin (7th - 12th April 1942).

'The Ahnenerbe offers 100 Isopan F [40 ISO black and white film], colour film and a Leica model IIIa.'

Friday 10th April: Made an appointment for the evening with ER (Erich Retzlaff, Von Richthofen str. 83) We discussed the details of a colour photobook on the Netherlands which would be published by Metzner Verlag. R. had had a meeting about this and a letter to Hamer Verlag was already on the way. We agreed in principle to have VHD write the text and to collaborate on the pictures. R. mentioned several locations in Sl. Holstein and in Noord Friesland that were worth a visit, but VHD already knew these locations. R. also said that VHD could receive a Rolleiflex, by way of the 'management', probably without costs, considering the photo-material that VHD collects.'

Saturday 11th April: Meeting with Prof. Dr [Wilhelm] Unverzagt, on which occasion more locations for Sl Holstein were discussed. Then a meeting with Retzlaff with Metzner Verlag (Dr. Voigt). Dr Voigt preferred to see more emphasis put on the German character of the Netherlands. [publication] Numbers: 20,000 copies of which 8000 for the Netherlands.

19. 'Deutsches Ahnenerbe – Studiengesellschaft für Geistesurgeschichte' (later shortened to 'Das Ahnenerbe-SS') was formed by Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler in 1935 with the intention to investigate, research and promote the archaeology, history and culture of the (broadly speaking) Germanic race.

20. Heemskerck Düker worked for e.g. the Dutch *Volksche Werkgemeenschap*, a cultural department of the SS. See www.nederlandsfotomuseum.nl/nl/collecties/fotografen-in-collecties/alle-fotografen/fotograaf/9bde548e-a24a-24a0-754a-f099c389f3dd [22.11.2014].

21. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) was a Russian born occultist whose writings, such as *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) and occult movement the Theosophical Society, became enormously influential on the German occult and *völkisch* scene. In particular, her esoteric history of the world with its 'Root Races' could be interpreted to accord with *völkisch* thinking about the Aryan race and the origins of the Germanic *volk* in a Hyperborean *Urheimat*. For the definitive academic examination of the influence of the occult on

Figure 5
Erich Retzlaff, Visegrad, c.1942, published
in: *Länder und Völker an der Donau: Rumänien,
Bulgarien, Ungarn, Kroatien*,
Vienna: Andermann 1944.

Figure 6
Erich Retzlaff, Akerman, rumänisch Cetatea
Alba, die Alte Trutzburg am Dnjestr, c.1942,
published in: *Länder und Völker an der Donau:
Rumänien, Bulgarien, Ungarn, Kroatien*,
Vienna: Andermann 1944.

With R. a short discussion about when the photo journey could be made, end of August - beginning of September...²²

It was this kind of support that could 'open doors' and circumvent the stringent controls on materials and publication itself. Certainly, production and distribution of books was strictly

controlled and how much and what could be published was drastically affected by a chronic shortage of both paper – due to rationing – and labour in Germany at this time. In addition, damage from allied bombing also severely limited supplies and production. Overall, a publication's fate depended on whether or not it would provide, "a beneficial influence on our Volk's struggle for existence."²³ Evidently, *Länder und Völker* passed this test.²⁴ Significantly, if the assumption about when Retzlaff undertook the *Länder und Völker* project is correct, the offer of support for the proposed Dutch project from the SS occurred at around the most likely time that Retzlaff began photographing along the Danube (sometime in 1942). Is it possible that, with the failure of the Dutch project to materialise, Retzlaff negotiated with the *Ahnenerbe*-SS for a journey to the Balkans instead?

The subject matter

Retzlaff's publication was not singular as an example of travel photography of the east published during this period. For example, Ernst Tropper's book *Slowakei: Land zwischen Ost und West* was also brought out in 1944 and contains a series of black and white images of Slovakian peasants in traditional costumes and in picturesque surroundings. However, although Retzlaff's work adopts a similar approach to Tropper's (and indeed others of this period), *Länder und Völker* is more expansive, politically layered and has the added drama of colour. As Thierfelder stated in the introduction when presenting Retzlaff's collection of images:



National Socialism, see Nicholas Goodrick Clarke's, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, New York: New York University Press 1992.

22. These notes, translated from the Dutch, are courtesy of Dr. Remco Ensels, personal communication 12 August 2013.

23. R. Erckmann, 'Grundsätzliches zur Papierfrage', in *Der Buchhändler im neuen Reich* 7, 1942. Quoted in Barbian (reference 1), 215.

24. Whether or not Himmler's Ahnenerbe financed Retzlaff will probably never be known. However, given the circumstances (war, cost, access) and in

light of Retzlaff's collaboration with the *Ahnenerbe* in 1942, it does seem to be a distinct possibility. Retzlaff's photographic vision of the German certainly accorded with that of the *Reichsführer*-SS. Retzlaff's physiognomic and ethnographic photography was regarded by the NSDAP as ideologically didactic and, besides his book publications, many of his photographs were used to illustrate articles and as cover images for journals such as *Volk und Rasse*, *NS Frauen-Warte* and *Signal*.



Figure 7

Erich Retzlaff, *Die Hortobagy-Puszta Ungarn*, c.1942, published in: *Länder und Völker an der Donau: Rumänien, Bulgarien, Ungarn, Kroatien*, Vienna: Andermann 1944.

“While we know that no image, neither painting nor colour photography, can convey more than a distant reflection of reality, the reflection does at least bring that reality closer to us.”²⁵

The colour plates are presented in a reverse order from the Black Sea upstream along the Danube towards the Reich. The Danube of course was considered a specifically ‘Germanic’ river originating as it does in the Black Forest. It was seen as a highway for trade, settlement and political influence. For example, when considering the resettlement of *Volksdeutsche* (in this case the South Tyroleans) in the Crimea (an area designated as the *Gotengau* in honour of the original Gothic settlements in the east), Hitler stated “Their transfer to the Crimea presents neither physical nor psychological difficulty [...] all they have to do is sail down one German waterway, the Danube, and they are there.”²⁶

The range of photographs in Retzlaff’s book along this ‘German waterway’ includes peasants tending their livestock, dramatic landscape views, architecture, town- and cityscapes, as well as peasant costumes. Some of the plates are reminiscent of the kind of travel photography

25. Thierfelder, [reference 15], 7 [author’s translation].

26. Adolf Hitler, *Hitler’s Table Talk 1941-1944: His Private Conversations*, H.R. Trevor-Roper (ed.), London: Phoenix, 2000. 548.

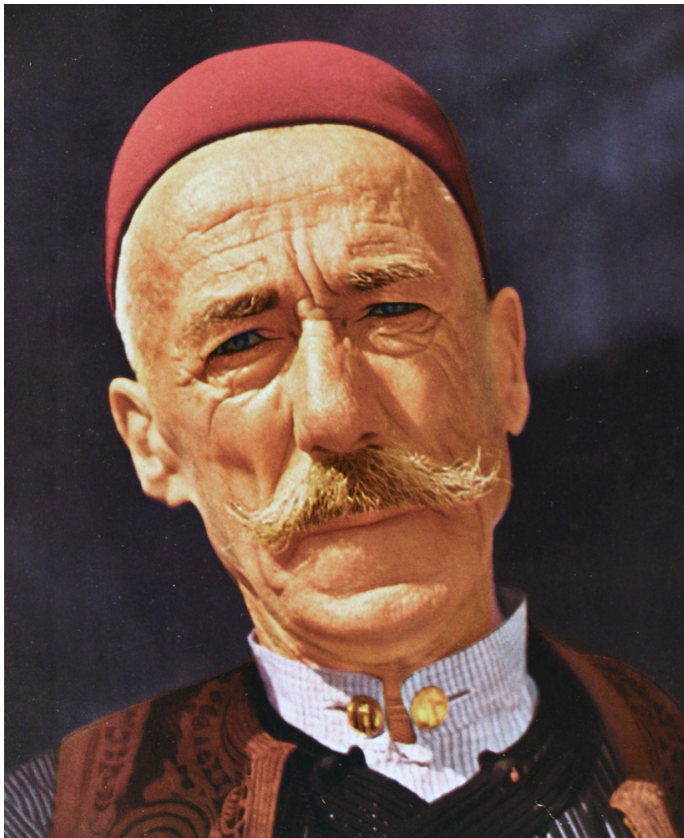


Figure 8
Erich Retzlaff, *Ein kroatischer Bauer*, c.1942,
published in: *Länder und Völker an der Donau:
Rumänien, Bulgarien, Ungarn, Kroatien*,
Vienna: Andermann 1944.

used to encourage tourism (for example, images of people enjoying the sun, sea and sand on a Dalmatian beach or dramatic sunsets over water as in (fig.3) *Sonnenaufgang am Plattensee Ungarn* yet others have a different tenor and suggest an agenda that is celebratory, nostalgic and simultaneously analytical.

The first photograph in the book (fig. 4) is an evocative view over the Romanian Carpathian Mountains. Shrouded in mist, forested and fore-grounded by a huge craggy rockface, the photograph acts as a gateway into the landscape that the reader is about to explore. As a visual device it is an entry point, a pass through the mountains that leads onwards from a familiar alpine scene (mountains and pine forests) to new and diverse lands. Equally, the other landscape photographs in the text can be read as a constructed visual dialogue where they act as more than a mere window onto a scene. Retzlaff's photograph of the castle of Visegrad in Hungary (fig. 5) for example shows a romantic ruin rising high above the Danube valley and flanked by distant blue mountains. With crumbling crenulations and broken towers still watching over the Danube, Retzlaff's composition alludes to popular medieval romance that is coupled with the knowledge that castles such as Visegrad played a pivotal role in the defence of Christendom against the Golden Horde and later the Ottoman Empire. The notion of the vigilant defence of the west from the

ever-present danger of invading forces from the east would not have been lost on a readership in Germany that by 1944 was keyed up to the growing threat of the – seemingly unstoppable – advancing Soviet forces.

Whilst some of the plates, such as those of the fortresses of Visegrad and Akerman (fig. 6), display an unambiguous and romantic representation of martial history (with its historical echoes to the contemporary war in the east), the double page spread on pages 64 and 65 (fig. 7) shows something altogether more peaceful. Two Hungarian herdsmen stand on the Great Hungarian plain, the *Hortobagy Puszta*. They are shown facing each other, leaning on their staffs, next to a pool or perhaps small river in the ancient landscape of the *Puszta* illustrated here. On the far shore, a herd of Hungarian grey cattle is spread as far as the eye can see. Above, the blue sky is full of large white clouds that do nothing to block out the strong directional light of the sun that illuminates the two men. The two figures are both barefoot – in Retzlaff's worldview, 'connected' to their land. They wear traditional hats and beautifully embroidered



Figure 9
Erich Retzlaff, *Eine deutsche Frau aus Siebenbürgen Rumänien*, c.1942, published in: *Länder und Völker an der Donau: Rumänien, Bulgarien, Ungarn, Kroatien*, Vienna: Andermann 1944.

coats. Everything about this photograph suggests peace and tranquility with an unsullied time-honoured order. It is also very much a piece of theatre. The photograph is concerned with perpetuity. There is no hint of the coming geo-political shift that will culminate in the autumn of 1944 with a major German-Soviet tank battle on the *Puszta* itself.²⁷ The photograph acts as an idealised façade to the political reality of the war.

Retzlaff seemed equally comfortable in applying his not inconsiderable photographic skills to the landscape as to the portrait, but it is his portraits (though there are relatively few in this volume) that act as the mainstay of the overall composition. One of the most striking of these is the portrait of the Croatian farmer (*Ein kroatischer Bauer*) (fig. 8). Of all the portraits, it is the closest cropped with Retzlaff's familiar trope of pushing the viewer closer to the subject presented here on an almost life-size scale. The colour photograph reveals that the man, albeit a Croatian, is a 'racial brother', his eyes are blue, his colouring blonde. Indeed, apart from the title and the costume, the man could quite easily be one of Retzlaff's German subjects from his 1940

27. Rudolf Pencz, *For the Homeland: The 31st Waffen-SS Volunteer Grenadier Division in World War II*, Mechanicsburg (PA): Stackpole Books, 2009, 52.



Figure 10
Erich Retzlaff, *Heltau, eine sächsische Kirchenburg in Siebenbürgen, Rumänien*, c.1942, published in: *Länder und Völker an der Donau: Rumänien, Bulgarien, Ungarn, Kroatien*, Vienna: Andermann 1944.

book *Niederdeutschland*.²⁸ By making such a connection, Retzlaff reminds the reader of Thierfelder's words that these are, "European, not Oriental peoples..." This assertion (both visual and textual) implies the broader relationship of 'Aryan' peoples outside of the Germanic *Reich*. These tenuous links were just the kind of 'evidence' that scholars and scientists were collecting across occupied Europe for Himmler's *Ahnenerbe* in his search for the legacies and relics of his primeval race, the Aryans.

Colour accentuates everything about the farmer pictured here, from his direct gaze to the traditional costume, a red Dalmatian cap, embroidered vest and gold clasped shirt. With the one exception of an image of bathers on a Dalmatian beach in their modern swimming costumes, no one in the book is shown wearing anything resembling twentieth century 'western' style dress. These somewhat timeless photographs show the costumes of the festival, the wedding, the display. They are as much fairytale fantasy as documentary photography for, by representing these peoples as tradition-bound just as he had represented the German peasant in exactly the same manner in his *Deutsche Trachten* (1936), Retzlaff is saying something about a rejection of modernity, a celebration of tradition, a longing for a lost golden age. It is perhaps symptomatic of National Socialism that it employed the latest in technology to relocate the past in the future.

This eulogy of the past and the Germanic is especially evident when the *Volksdeutsche* are photographed (and discussed in Thierfelder's text). It is those people of German descent in Hungary and Romania that are of especial interest. They are regarded as demonstrative of a superior German influence that had made a disproportionately great contribution to the nations in which they resided. Represented here, they are the bringers of order, efficiency and high culture. As Thierfelder states: "In the landscape of fortified churches, stately Saxon villages and fortified towns blows another air [...] Where in Europe have farmers built like in Heltau?"²⁹

The striking portrait of the Transylvanian Saxon woman (*Eine deutsche Frau aus Siebenbürgen, Rumänien*) (fig. 9) is juxtaposed with a view of Saxon architecture on the opposite page (*Heltau, eine sächsische Kirchenburg in Siebenbürgen, Rumänien*) (fig. 10). This use of visual doubling is designed to underline the influence and presence of this specifically German legacy (in this case in Romania). The head-and-shoulders portrait of the woman is one of the most painterly of the entire group. She turns to regard the viewer; formally composed, she looks as if she has been in prayer; her bible is still clasped in her hands. In a dark dress set off by a white head

28. Retzlaff produced a series of striking colour portraits of northern Germans that are illustrated in his book *Niederdeutschland, Landschaft und Volkstum*, Munich: Verlag Knorr & Hirth 1940.

29. Heltau, Romanian Cisnădie, was a German-dominated town in the district of Sibiu, in Siebenbürgen, or Transylvanian Saxony. Thierfelder, [reference 15], 12 [author's translation].



Figure 11
Erich Retzlaff, *Eine Schwabenbraut aus Nagyapard bei Fünfkirchen, Ungarn*, c.1942, published in: *Länder und Völker an der Donau: Rumänien, Bulgarien, Ungarn, Kroatien*, Vienna: Andermann 1944.

völkisch life' reappeared fourteen years after the publication of *Länder und Völker* when an alternative portrait of her was reproduced in Retzlaff's revised 1958 edition of *Deutsche Trachten* (fig. 12). Long after the original sitting, her face still frozen in that 1940s moment, she was an icon that, by 1958, was lost somewhere behind the Iron Curtain. Purged of its National Socialist context, pathos is all that remains in her smiling features.

scarf, Retzlaff's portrait of her looks like a fifteenth century painting from the Netherlands. This interpretation (by a photographer who had already previously embraced a New Objectivity approach to the portrait in the 1930s) seems anachronistic, more akin to Romantic Pictorialism. However, it is consistent with Retzlaff's method in *Länder und Völker* where, more than in any of his previous book publications (even *Deutsche Trachten*), he indulges in what can only be a deliberate wistfulness, a regard for something that is precious and under threat. It is as if Retzlaff can only react in this way to these subjects.

The young bride (*Eine Schwabenbraut aus Nagyapard bei Fünfkirchen - Ungarn*) (fig. 11) is another representative of a separate group of these *Volksdeutsche* (in this case located in Hungary) and a Swabian descendent of eighteenth century resettlement after the expulsion of the Ottoman Empire. She is selected here to represent a type not an individual. As with all Retzlaff's sitters, we do not know her name. But Retzlaff has presented her as an example of German endurance, tradition and race. And, as Thierfelder pointed out in a sentence that might have been the caption for any number of photographic books on German regional costume produced by Retzlaff and others throughout the 30s and 40s: "It is not only the noble, dignified dress....it is also the unmixed race, a particular mental and physical attitude, all indicating a responsibly conscious *völkisch* life throughout the centuries."³⁰

This young female example of 'a responsibly conscious

30. Thierfelder, [reference 15], 13 [author's translation]



Conclusion

The photographs Retzlaff produced for *Länder und Völker* served more than simply being a picturesque view of travel documentation and can be read as ideological objects cloaked in an aesthetic that was both modern (in terms of materials and production) and retrospective (traditionally pictorial in its execution). The photographs were reproduced in an expensive book format with a text by a leading German academic at a time when Germany was clearly losing the war. These photographs represent a type of visual colonialism in that they survey what the landscape could offer to a German hegemony and the specific and important relationship (propounded by those such as Thierfelder) that existed between Germany and its Balkan neighbours. It is of course a selective vision; images of the people, cities, towns and landscapes of Germany's allies are represented (Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria), others are not (notably Serbia, there are no Serbians, no pictures of Belgrade). This selective approach is typical of National Socialist policy towards different racial groups such as the Slavs and other allied and conquered peoples.³¹ For example, some Slavs (Croats, Bulgarians) were regarded as 'good', others (Poles, Serbs) were 'bad'.

The most significant people are the *Volksdeutsche*, represented in *Länder und Völker* by the Danube Swabians and the Transylvanian Saxons. These people, their towns and the landscapes that they inhabited are intended to be read as representative of a resilient German autarky far from the Fatherland. The quality of their architecture, their folk traditions (dress, song, dance), their 'civilising' influence; all are presented as demonstrating the superiority of German racial stock even when sundered from the Fatherland itself.

Above all, *Länder und Völker* represents National Socialist obscurantism; it is propaganda indirectly concerned with the war and deliberately so. This was a time when that reality had already shifted, it was a time when desperate hopes of a miraculous salvation were being born; it was the time of the *Totaler Krieg*. The book is an imagining of things as they *ought* to be, a metaphorical visual construction of an ideal status quo. That subtext, in accordance with National Socialist ideology, was that there could be no return after the *Götterdämmerung*. If the unthinkable happened and National Socialism were to fail, if the Soviet Union were to triumph, then civilisation itself would be lost.

Figure 12
Erich Retzlaff, *Eine Schwabenbraut aus Nagyapard bei Fünfkirchen, Ungarn*, c.1942,
published in: *Deutsche Trachten*,
Königstein: Verlag Langewiesche Nachf. 1958.

31. For further reading about this topic see: Rolf Sachsse, *Die Erziehung zum Wegsehen. Fotografie im NS-Staat*, Dresden: Verlag der Kunst – Philo Fine Arts 2003.